THE PERELMAN QUADRANGLE,
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Location: Philadelphia, PA
Client: University of Pennsylvania
Area: 257,000 gsf (building); 26,000 gsf (exterior paved areas)
Construction Cost: $67,500,000
Completion: 2000

In choosing the University of Pennsylvania’s historic heart as the site of the Perelman Quadrangle student center, the University has restored and adapted its most prominent, loved, and remembered historic buildings to form a student precinct around the original student union. The plan evolved from a series of master planning and building feasibility studies VSBA conducted for the University from 1988 to 1994.

In the late 19th-century, the University of Pennsylvania’s Houston Hall was the nation’s first student union. Built adjacent to College Hall (the campus’s first building), Logan Hall, and Irvine Auditorium, and across from dormitories on Spruce Street, Houston Hall complemented the academic, administrative, and residential functions of the University. As Penn expanded, this student-centered coherence was lost.

The Perelman Quadrangle expands the original functions of Houston Hall across Wynn Commons into parts of the surrounding College, Logan, and Williams Halls and Irvine Auditorium. In the process, each is preserved, adapted, and reestablished to the importance it once held on an augmented and replenished Quadrangle. The central Wynn Commons, lined by Collegiate Gothic and High Victorian buildings enriched with shade trees, seating, rostrums, and heraldry, once again forms a memorable image of the University.

Wynn Commons’ design provides a unifying sense of arrival, place, and enclosure. Gateway markers announce a transition into the Quadrangle within the historic fabric of the campus. An amphitheater and a rostrum at opposite ends of Wynn Commons complement new building entries. The Commons is edged by low retaining walls that encourage gathering and sitting. Inscriptions, images, and patterns applied to landscape elements add additional visual and aesthetic interest. Handicapped access is provided throughout the complex of buildings. Service yard improvements at Irvine, with a tunnel connecting to Houston, facilitate and help conceal building servicing.
View of Wynn Commons, an aerial perspective of the Quad, and a site plan indicating public spaces
The sense of place and of community continues inside the buildings. Houston Hall has been restored to its former grandeur and resumes its original purpose. Sealed for decades, College Hall’s entrance onto the Commons is reopened and focuses the Office of Graduate Admissions onto the Commons, making Perelman Quadrangle the first destination of many prospective students.

Irvine Auditorium’s great hall has been adaptively restored as a 1200-seat performance hall. Renovations provide the auditorium with modern sight-lines and acoustical, lighting, and environmental conditions for music, speech, and organ performance, while its chromatic architectural glory and historic organ are preserved. Student practice rooms, a rehearsal hall, double-story side lobbies, and appropriate backstage spaces have also been restored. A new campus-side entry from the Commons to Irvine encourages day-to-day use and enhances the Auditorium’s participation in the Quadrangle.

Renovations to Logan Hall and Williams Hall (a classroom building dating from the 1960s) facilitate space sharing to meet the School of Arts and Sciences’ departmental and administrative needs. Heavily used functions like a student art gallery, auditoriums, and meeting rooms are located in ground-level spaces; street-level rooms in Williams Hall provide expansion space for future needs. Silfen Student Study Center, a new 24-hour study pavilion, helps to harmonize the modern and historic buildings. The new East entrance to Logan Hall provides a more direct connection of the administrative offices of Arts and Sciences in Logan to the rest of the Perelman Quadrangle complex.

WYNN COMMONS

Views of seating and signage along Wynn Commons
HOUSTON HALL

Left: view of info desk, Hall of Flags, & servery; Right: info desk, lounge, & servery
IRVINE AUDITORIUM

Exterior

Cafe

Main stage

Detail of decoration

Recital Hall

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